

LIFE AND LITERATURE: THE WORK OF JANE AUSTEN

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Jane Austen has often been compared to Shakespeare both for the seemingly effortless power of her writing and because her personality never intrudes on her work. Whatever her real opinions may have been on any given subject — women's rights, women's writing (all right, she gave herself away a bit on that one), familial and romantic relationships — they were kept sternly in check, at least when she picked up her pen. The story always came first. Austen's ego was never on the line, and her writing, while often passionate, never crosses the line into the polemical.

Her ability to remove herself from the page, combined with the fact that we know so little about her personal life (another factor in common with the big S), renders Austen a particularly intriguing enigma. While she was not as isolated as many imagine her to have been — Edward Gorey, an admirer of her work, once described himself sitting in a restaurant in New York watching more people walk by than Austen had ever seen in her life, a gross exaggeration at best — her life was nevertheless a quiet and relatively eventless one, at least at first glance. How did this woman, who never married, never had children, and never had any independence or near enough money (Edward Gorey certainly made more from his books than Austen ever did from hers, and consider which of the two writers is better known and then go mope for a while) write so unerringly about not only the human heart but society, which she saw so little of, and most of that from the outside looking in?

These questions are so broad that it may not be possible to answer them either completely or well. Better writers than I have tried, and I would recommend that those interested in deeper ponderings on the subject turn to Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Park Honan's biography of Austen, and, perhaps most controversially, D. W. Harding's *Regulated Hatred*. For the general reader who merely admires Austen's six novels and is curious as to possible links between her life and her work, I present here some points of interest my own reading has uncovered. Some of the connections I will draw are no doubt already known to those interested in her work; some may be entirely new. All, given the regrettable paucity of letters, diaries, and other testaments from Austen herself, must remain mere speculation.

Jane Austen's great-grandmother on her father's side, Elizabeth Austen, was a remarkable woman, for her time or any other. She left her descendants a piece entitled "Memorandums for mine and my Children's reading, being my own tho'ts on our affairs 1706, 1707." The dry heading belies the fascinating life delineated in this paper. It also makes it an easy document to dismiss. But just as Elizabeth Austen's personal struggles would have a powerful impact on her family's life, so would her written work play perhaps a small part in one who would much later be acknowledged as one of the greatest writers in the English language.

Elizabeth Austen, nee Weller, married John Austen, the only son of a cloth manufacturer. Both his and her family had money, and

the couple were able to live in comfort, producing seven children (one daughter, then six sons) in relatively short order. Unfortunately, John's health was not good, and he had accumulated debts before his marriage. He died while his youngest son was but an infant. His will entrusted the education of his children to his wife; however, his brothers-in-law were appointed executors of his estate. On his deathbed, he asked his own father to look after the family as well, and received a promise in reply that this would be done. What was more, John was assured that his household goods wouldn't be sold off to pay his outstanding debts.

Unfortunately, old Mr. Austen seems to have conveniently forgotten this last promise. Elizabeth, newly widowed and surely having enough on her mind without this irritant, reminded him. He grudgingly promised 200 pounds toward saving the goods, and promptly died before he could be put to the trouble of paying up. His will was generous to Elizabeth's eldest son, who was heir to the estate, but left the rest of the children and of course Elizabeth herself almost penniless. Desperately, Mrs. Austen turned to her brothers-in-law. Perhaps they felt little familial duty toward the wife of a wife's brother; perhaps they were simply cads. At any rate, there was no help from that quarter.

Much as a modern woman would, Elizabeth considered suing, but that took money and time she didn't have. She was forced instead to sell off the very household items she had been told were hers to keep. Between doing this and borrowing money, she managed to pay off her husband's old debts and keep her family afloat. But it was touch and go for a time, and not a very pleasant existence, especially for a woman originally of a wealthy family and undoubtedly used to better than just scraping by.

Compare this to the beginning of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dashwood have an affectionate relationship with Henry's old uncle, whom they care for in his old age. Henry has one son by a previous marriage and three daughters by his current wife. The son is "amply provided for": his mother left him a great deal of money, and he married rich. "To him, therefore, the succession to the Norland estate was not so really important as to his sisters." They, however, are intensely vulnerable economically; their mother has nothing, and their father very little. The old uncle, who has had every opportunity while living with the family of observing their financial situation, leaves a little money "as a mark of his affection" to the three daughters, but the bulk of his fortune is left to the adorable little four-year-old son of Henry Dashwood's son.

Henry himself then decides he must be frugal and put aside money to provide for his daughters, but he only survives his uncle by a year. "His son was sent for," Austen tells us, "as soon as his danger was known, and to him Mr. Dashwood recommended, with all the strength and urgency which illness could command, the interest of his mother-in-law [i.e. stepmother] and sisters." Naturally his son promises to do "every thing in his power to make them comfortable." Very good; but the assurance is not legally binding. In some of her most brilliant writing, Austen goes on to show how young Mr. Dashwood's good intentions are whittled down to greedy uselessness by his "narrow-minded and selfish" wife. The rest of the novel is the story of four fortuneless women struggling to maintain a degree of dignity and quality of life in an indifferent world.

The plot is by no means a match point-for-point to Elizabeth Austen's plight, but there is a strong emotional resemblance. Jane Austen, who as an unmarried sister lived after her father's death

on whatever kindness her brothers had the ability and inclination to show, is keenly sensitive to women's dependency on the good will of their male relations, and their helplessness if that good will is lacking. The example of her great-grandmother, who managed in the end through wit, ingenuity, and a great deal of hard work both to maintain and to educate her sons in spite of the obstacles before her, surely left its mark.

It is worth noting that, in adapting the real-life story of her great-grandmother to her earliest novel, Austen chose to change the six sons and one daughter to three nearly-grown girls. This accomplishes two things. It clears up a rather cluttered landscape, novelistically speaking. It also makes the situation more threatening. Female characters, in a gothic novel or any other sort, are automatically vulnerable. One need do very little to menace them.

Austen also ignores the point, around which her great-grandmother geared many of her life choices, about the pressing need to educate male offspring in order that they may make their way in the world. The education of female children was a matter of comparative indifference. They could be taught by their mothers, or sent off to girls' boarding schools, which were "not hard to find in the 1780's," as Claire Tomalin points out in her life of Jane Austen, even for very young children whose families were not particularly wealthy. "Accounts of what went on in them," though, "make depressing, and sometimes horrifying reading." Tomalin goes on to prove this quite thoroughly with tales of girls half-starved, confined, chilled, and forced into "backboards and iron collars." Even worse, contagious diseases often swept through these establishments as easily as a breeze through an open window.

Jane Austen was sent away to school when she was a mere seven years old, along with her older sister Cassandra. Whether the backboards and collars were in use at their school isn't known; but infectious fevers were there in force and Jane very nearly died of one before being fetched home in the nick of time. The double trauma of forced separation from her family at such a young age and the brush with death this entailed could not fail to leave its mark on a sensitive mind such as Austen's. This formative experience, thinly veiled as fiction, would burn with anguish and righteous rage on the early pages of Austen's most popular novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Shockingly enough, at least to modern sensibilities, Jane Austen was sent out to boarding school yet again after a year at home. This time it was to the Abbey School, a vast improvement over the last place. It was run by a Madame La Tour-nelle, and the proprietress was a Madame St. Quintin. Though Austen once pronounced that she was ignorant of any language but English, she did in fact learn some French at this school. Her grasp of the tongue must have been improved by the time she later spent with her exotic cousin Eliza de Feuillide, who was married to a Frenchman and spoke French like a native.

More important than any knowledge of the French language, though, was the glimpse Austen's cousin gave her of French politics. These were the years of the Revolution, and Eliza's claims, false or misguided though they were, that she was a countess by marriage were to become dangerous ones. Her husband, Jean Francois Capot de Feuillide, was a fervent royalist. In 1794, he attempted to help an elderly marquise, who had been arrested for the usual aristocratic crime of "conspiring against the Republic." Jean was himself betrayed, arrested, tried, and condemned to

death. By guillotine, of course.

His wife, who had never pretended to have made a marriage of affection, was undoubtedly more shocked and shaken by the event than grieved. Of greater concern to her was the fate of her late husband's estates. Several years later, when the Treaty of Amiens made travel to the Continent possible again, Eliza de Feuillide went with her second husband, Jane Austen's brother, in an attempt to reclaim what was hers. According to family lore, the two were very nearly trapped in France when the fragile peace shattered. They escaped only because Eliza, who spoke perfect French, did all the talking and passed them off as a French rather than an English couple.

Again, like her translation of real events into the backstory of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen is not married to the truth here, favoring a good story any day. But there are at least emotional echoes of Eliza de Feuillide's trials and tribulations to be found in Austen's most adventurous novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The ambivalence contained therein — sympathy for the poor and downtrodden measured against distaste for too violent a shaking-up of the social order — is Austen at her finest.

In spite of these three books being such disparate works on the face of it, they have a source in common: Austen drew, one way or another, on family experience. It is ironic that a writer of supposedly limited life experience should be able to weave all that she did see and hear into such gripping works of fiction.

This ability shines powerfully in the work that is perhaps Austen's most controversial because of the extreme, almost unlikeable, certainly unbelievable virtue of its heroine. In order to appreciate this work fully, one ought to have some knowledge of a few of Jane Austen's nearest relatives about whom one generally hears little.

Austen came from a large family — she was the seventh of eight children. One of her brothers, ten years older than herself, failed to develop normally. It is difficult to determine at this late date exactly what troubled him. He could walk; he may have been able to communicate in sign language — Jane Austen once mentioned talking with her fingers, and it might be inferred that she learned to speak this way in order to talk to her brother. Certainly his disabilities were mental as well as physical. His father wrote of the one comfort to be taken from George Austen's condition: at least "he cannot be a bad or a wicked child."

Jane Austen's mother had suffered a similar experience in childhood with her own brother, eight years younger than herself. And Austen watched the only son of her favorite cousin, the aforementioned Eliza, grow and struggle with his own disabilities. By the age of two it was clear that something was very seriously the matter with him. He had frequent convulsive fits, and couldn't stand or speak. Touchingly, Eliza refused to send him to board with and be cared for by strangers, as had been the case with Austen's brother and uncle. Instead she kept him with her for all his short life, encouraging him in every way she could, insisting that he was always performing some new feat or other only visible to her loving eyes. This picture of combined frailty and sweetness must have proved irresistible to Jane Austen, who surely was sketching from life when she wrote the work that has been described by some critics as beautifully pure and graceful, by others as sickeningly sweet: *Helen Keller's The Story of My Life*.

But Jane Austen didn't always play the heavy on the page. Though some of her work, as we have seen, is indeed social commentary at its finest, some is just plain fun. One work in particular is unquestion-

ably her lightest and brightest. In writing it Austen makes plain the passion for popular novels that ran in her family: she and her siblings were fond of reading for pleasure as well as edification. Austen spiritedly defended her choice of reading matter, much of which would make the best-sellers of our day look dour and weighty in comparison; but she was not above poking fun at the very novels she enjoyed. One of her favorite authors comes in for some good-hearted teasing in Austen's send-up of popular novels of the time, *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

If Austen was skilled at drawing on family lore, and known for her keen sense of humor, one must never suppose her to be limited entirely to the domestic sphere, enmeshed in mere comedies of manners. An avid reader of newspapers who had brothers in the navy, she was well-informed when it came to current affairs. England was more often at war than not on some front or other in the course of Austen's too short life (she died at the age of 42), and if she rarely makes reference to politics it is not from indifference or ignorance, but rather because she knew her great gifts lay rather in the examination of the human heart than of the body politic. In her final

novel, though, she at last let some of her knowledge of and feelings about war erupt onto the page. *Slaughterhouse Five* is a marked departure from her previous works, and many consider it Austen's finest, if her most melancholy, book.

Too often Jane Austen is dismissed by those who haven't read her work as a glorified romance writer, natural mother to Harlequin Romances and their ilk. Her name is a byword for all things genteel and quaint, and she is imagined as frail both physically and emotionally, one who would give way to a delicate swoon at the merest hint of (gasp) sex or violence. Jane Austen was a writer of great power and passion, who could spot a fool at a thousand paces and, while an admirer of romance, never stooped to sentimentality or mawkishness. That she is so misunderstood even with all her novels vigorously in print may be in part because her life — not sheltered or unpeopled as even her admirers imagine it to be — is so little known, and so she is cast into a corner of "nineteenth-century women writers" with all the connotations thereto. If I have here removed some of her enigma, I hope it is in the good cause of helping to build a reputation more fitted to the truth about Jane Austen. ~